

2024 WVU FOOTBALL KICKOFF

SPECIAL EDITION



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NEAL BROWN
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SUNDAY, AUGUST 25, 2024

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Head Coach Neal Brown



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

West Virginia Mountaineer head coach Neal Brown hoists the trophy after defeating the North Carolina Tar Heels in the Duke's Mayo Bowl on Wednesday, Dec. 27, 2023 at Bank of America Stadium.

Birthday: March 11

Hometown: Danville, Ky.

Education: UMass, 2002 (bachelor's); UMass, 2005 (master's)

Playing Career: Kentucky, 1998-2000; UMass, 2001-02

Family: Wife, Brooke; children, Adalyn, Anslee, Dax

It's a proven fact that you win with people, and no one knows that better than Neal Brown. He has a commitment to investing time and resources in his staff and players, mentoring and preparing them to carry out the mission of West Virginia University football, not only on the field but off of it as well.

After having his most successful season in 2023, Brown has his program prepared and ready with their goal of achieving higher aspirations in 2024. He, his staff and the Mountaineers not only want to compete for double-digit wins, but more importantly want to reach a coveted spot in not only the Big 12 championship game but the CFP playoff for the first time in school history.

WVU returns a significant amount of snaps and production from last year's team and retooled the roster to fill in the holes. That experience, along with offseason work being put in could put the lofty expectations within reach.

Brown has taken pride in having his program exude a strong identity on both sides of the ball. Offensively, WVU has a physical, hard-nosed running attack that also can throw downfield,

as well as find players out of the backfield. Defensively, there is a high comfort level with their scheme, and their recruiting efforts center around bringing in the pieces that fit.

The 2023 Mountaineers football program was branded with the label "14" – picked to finish last in the Big 12 Conference preseason poll by the league media. However, Brown, his coaching staff and the entire program used that number as the motivation needed to generate the best year of Mountaineers football since 2018, registering a 9-4 overall record, including a 30-10 win over North Carolina in the Duke's Mayo Bowl, a 6-3 mark in the league, and a No. 25 final ranking in the AFCA Final Coaches Poll.

Brown faced arguably the toughest schedule in his tenure. He earned Co-Big 12 Coach of the Year honors by Heartland College Sports. The conference finish tied the Mountaineers for fourth place – 10 spots better than originally predicted. Since becoming a member of the Big 12 Conference in 2012, WVU has had only one better season, 2016, when it won seven league games.

Brown was named WVU's 35th head football coach on Jan. 5, 2019.

He spent the previous four years as the head coach at Troy University (2015-18), compiling a 35-16 record, including 3-0 in bowl games.

Prior to Brown's first season at Troy in 2015, he spent two years (2013-14) as the offensive coordinator under Mark Stoops at Kentucky.

He also spent three years at Texas Tech (2010-12) as the offensive coordinator after his first stint at Troy as an assistant coach from 2006-09.

Coach bios courtesy of WVU Athletics

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Coordinators

Chad Scott, offensive coordinator/running backs coach

Birthday: June 11

Hometown: Plant City, Fla.

Education: North Carolina, 2004 (bachelor's)

Playing Career: Kentucky, 2000-01; North Carolina, 2002-04

Family: Wife, Shambrica; children, Kori, Jakobe

Chad Scott, in his second year as the offensive coordinator, is in his sixth year on Neal Brown's coaching staff at West Virginia. Scott was the co-offensive coordinator for his first three years, before serving as the run game coordinator in 2022 and has coached the running backs all five years.

West Virginia finished with 2,976 rushing yards in 2023, ranking No. 1 among Power 5 schools. In Big 12 games, WVU was the only school to finish with more than 2,000 rushing yards (2,211). Among Power 5 schools, WVU has the longest streak of games with 140 or more rushing yards (16), three more than any other team. In Big 12 games, the Mountaineers led the league in rushing yards per game (245.67) and tied for No. 1 in rushing touchdowns (24).

Freshman running back Jahiem White was named to The Athletic's Freshman All-America Team and On3's True Freshman All-America



Team, marking the eighth time in the past 10 years that WVU has had a player named to a freshman All-America team and 14th since 2005. White led the Big 12 in yards per carry at 7.7, marking the most by any freshman running back and breaking WVU's single-season record.

White led WVU with 1,086 all-purpose yards, including 842 rushing, 125 receiving and 119 kickoff return yards.

CJ Donaldson Jr. tied for No. 5 in the Big 12 and No. 39 nationally in rushing touchdowns (11), ranked No. 8 in the Big 12 in touchdowns and No. 10 in rushing yards (798).

Scott has worked with coach Neal Brown during three different coaching tenures: Kentucky (RB/2013-14), Texas Tech (RB/2010-12) and Troy (RB/2007-09). He was a teammate of Brown's at UK.

He came to WVU after serving as the tight ends and hybrids coach at North Carolina from 2016-18.

Scott returned to Chapel Hill after coaching at Kentucky, where he tutored running backs from 2013-15 and was the run-game coordinator in 2014-15.

He spent three seasons at Texas Tech from 2010-12.

Scott earned his first full-time coaching job at Troy as an assistant coach for running backs from 2007-09, helping lead the Trojans to three consecutive Sun Belt Conference Championships and a pair of appearances in the New Orleans Bowl.

Jordan Lesley, defensive coordinator

Birthday: Dec. 15

Hometown: Fulton, Miss.

Education: Troy, 2006 (bachelor's); Troy, 2007 (master's)

Playing Career: Troy, 2000-04

Family: Wife, Ann-Katherine; children, Mary-Kate, Mae-Blake, Jordan Jr.

Jordan Lesley, a nominee for the 2020 and 2021 Broyles Award, is in his sixth year on the Mountaineers football coaching staff and fourth year as the defensive coordinator. Under Lesley's guidance, the Mountaineer defense competes each year as one of the best units in the Big 12 Conference and in the nation.

In 2023, West Virginia's defense produced 6.5 tackles for loss per game, ranking No. 2 in the Big 12 and tied for No. 14 among Power Five schools. The Mountaineers showed an improvement of 40 places from 2022 (No. 67) to No. 27 in 2023. It also ranked No. 1 in the Big 12 in sacks, averaging 2.5 per game, tying for No. 19 in Power Five. The 33 sacks were the most since 2019 and WVU held 11 of its last 12 opponents to fewer than 300 yards passing.

Cornerback Beanie Bishop Jr., an All-Big 12 Conference First-Team honoree, earned a spot on 10 different All-America teams in 2023. He became



WVU's 13th consensus All-American and 112th All-American, including the 49th since 2002. He led the nation in passes defended (24) and

breakups (20), was second in forced incompletions (17) and was tied for No. 19 in interceptions (4). He finished No. 2 in WVU history for single-season pass breakups (20).

Lesley joined the Mountaineer coaching staff as the defensive line coach in 2019. He came with Neal Brown after serving as an assistant coach at Troy for three years (2016-18), the first two years as the defensive tackles coach and the 2018 season as the defensive line coach.

From 2016-18, Troy's defense allowed 20.8 points per game, ranking No. 4 nationally among non-power 5 schools.

Prior to Troy, Lesley was the defensive coordinator at East Mississippi Community College in Scooba, Mississippi (2013-15), before serving two stints at Northwest Mississippi Community College in Senatobia, Mississippi, first as defensive line coach in 2010 and then as the defensive coordinator and defensive line coach in 2012.

He also spent two stints at Kilgore College in Kilgore, Texas, first as the linebackers coach from 2007-09, and as the defensive coordinator in 2011. He spent a year as a graduate assistant coach at Troy in 2006.

Coach bios courtesy of WVU Athletics

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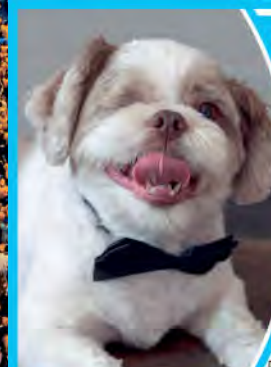
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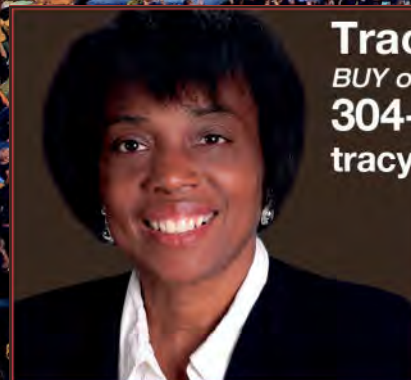
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West Virginia University

2023: 9-4 (6-3 Big 12)



West Virginia quarterback Garrett Greene.

William Wotring/The Dominion Post

BY CODY NESPOR

CNespor@DominionPost.com

The Mountaineers finally made their jump in Neal Brown's fifth season.

Following four mediocre campaigns, West Virginia broke out last season to win nine games, including the Duke's Mayo Bowl. Nine wins was the team's most since 2016 and its six conference victories were the most since 2018.

The Mountaineers managed their breakthrough season despite playing one of the toughest schedules in the country with 12 Power 5 opponents, including North Carolina in the Duke's Mayo Bowl.

WVU again faces a tough schedule in 2024 with 11 more game against Power 4 foes.

OFFENSE

West Virginia established its new identity as a true ground-and-pound offense last season. The Mountaineers led the Big 12 in rushing and finished fourth nationally.

Breakout true freshman Jahiem White ran for 842 yards and four touchdowns while CJ Donaldson still rushed for 798 yards and 11 touchdowns.

In his first season as a starter, quarterback Garrett Greene threw for 2,406 yards and 16 touchdowns against just four interceptions. He also ran for 772 yards and 13 more scores.

WVU added transfer receivers Jaden Bray (Oklahoma State) and Justin Robinson (Mississippi State) to a room that far exceeded expectations in 2023. Former walk-on Hudson Clement earned a scholarship after the second game of the season and finished with 480 yards and four touchdowns on 22 receptions.

Also back are Traylon Ray (18 catches, 321 yards, three touchdowns), Rodney Gallagher (10 for 74) and Preston Fox (26 catches, 368 yards, two touchdowns).

Kole Taylor returns for a second season at tight end after catching 35 passes for 444 yards and four scores.

The offensive line returns full-time starters Wyatt Milum (left tackle) and Tomas Rimac (left guard). Brandon Yates will slide to center after splitting time at right guard, where Ja'Quay Hubbard will take over full-time.

Last year's top backup Nick Malone will elevate to the starting role at right tackle.

WVU will again have one of the most experienced offensive lines in the country even after graduating multi-year starters Zach Frazier and Doug Nester.

DEFENSE

The Mountaineers made big strides on defense last season, finishing in the top half of the league in both total yards and points allowed. Depth was a big



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Mountaineers

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issue, however, and so the WVU coaching staff hit the transfer portal hard this winter.

Six new secondary players — Garnett Hollis Jr. (Northwestern), Jaheem Joseph (Northwestern), Adyen Garnes (Duquesne), TJ Crandall (Colorado State), Kekoura Tarnue (Jacksonville State) and Dontez Fagan (Charlotte) — bolster a group that returns safeties Aubrey Burks and Anthony Wilson and cornerback Jacolby Spells.

Several injuries at linebacker forced a lot of players into action before they were ready last year. Josiah Trotter got hurt in the spring, Trey Lathan went down in September and Ben Cutter started eight games as a true freshman. All three are fully healthy heading into the season with Trotter and Lathan penciled in as starters.

Reid Carrico (Ohio State) was brought in to add a veteran leader to the group.

WVU led the Big 12 with 33 sacks but wanted more production from its edge rushers, so FCS standout Ty French was brought into pair with Tyrin Bradley on the outside.

Along the line, Sean Martin and Edward Vesterinen are returning starters while Hammond Russell IV, Fatorma Mulbah, Asani Redwood and Troy transfer T.J. Jackson will fill out the rotation.

SPECIALISTS

All three of WVU's specialists are back for 2024.

Kicker Michael Hayes was 17-21 on field goals. Punter Oliver Straw averaged 43 yards and downed 19 inside the 20. Austin Brinkman is considered one of the best long snappers in the country.

WVU plans to try a number of players on kick returns, including White, Gallagher, Fox and Ray. Fox will continue to handle punt return duties.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Garrett Greene, Sr. — The Mountaineers' first home-grown quarterback in over 10 years, Greene proved himself to be one of the most explosive signal-callers in the country.

RB Jahiem White, Soph. — The undersized speedster had a true breakout in the second half of 2023. After running for 185 yards in the first seven games, White exploded for 657 yards across the final six games.

LB Josiah Trotter, R-Fr. — Trotter was expected to play a lot as a true freshman, but missed the entire 2023 season with a lower-body injury. He has all the physical gifts to be a stud at middle linebacker.



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

West Virginia defensive lineman Sean Martin.

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Penn State University

10-3 (7-2 Big Ten)



Penn State linebacker Abdul Carter.

AP Photo

BY CODY NESPOR

CNespor@DominionPost.com

If James Franklin's Penn State isn't considered one of the top programs in the country, then the Nittany Lions are just a tick below those that are.

The biggest mark against Franklin's tenure has been a lack of postseason success, with just one Big 10 championship and no playoff appearances.

The expanded 12-team playoff gives Franklin and PSU a clear path into the field, as long as they can take care of their regular season, which begins Aug. 31 in Morgantown.

The Nittany Lions' last trip to Morgantown came in 1992, a 40-26 victory. Seven of West Virginia's nine wins in the series have come on its home field.

The teams reignited their old rivalry, which was played annually for over 50 years, last year when Penn State won on its home field 38-15.

WVU now gets a crack at the Nittany Lions in Morgantown, the site of the Mountaineers' most recent victory in the series in 1988.

OFFENSE

Junior quarterback Drew Allar returns after a good-not-great debut season as Penn State's starter in 2023. Allar threw for 2,600 yards with 25 touchdowns against just two interceptions, but his worst performances came in the team's biggest games, against Michigan and Ohio State.

PSU returns very little receiving production from last year with Harrison Wallace III (19 catches, 228) leading the way.

Pennsylvania native Julian Fleming transfers in from Ohio State, but he was held below 300 yards last year.

Tight end Tyler Warren could be Allar's top target after finished with 422 yards and a team-high seven touchdowns in 2023.

The ground game will be strong again with the return of duo Nicholas Singleton (752 yards) and Kaytron Allen.

Up front, the team will replace three starters along the offensive line.

DEFENSE

Penn State fielded one of the best defenses in the nation last season, giving up the fewest yards per game (223.3) and third-least points per game (11.4).

Up front, the Nittany Lions return sixth-year defensive tackles Dvon Ellies and Hakeem Beamon.

Abdul Carter is making the transition from linebacker to edge after recording 4.5 sacks last season. He will pair with Dani Dennis-Sutton (3.5) sacks.

Transfer cornerbacks A.J. Harris (Georgia) and Jalen Kimber (Florida) were brought in to supplement a secondary that also has returning safeties Jaylen Reed (two interceptions) and Kevin Winston Jr. (one interception).



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Nittany Lions

Aug. 31 @ Milan Puskar Stadium

Sophomore Tony Rojas is thought of as a rising star at linebacker after registering 22 tackles, 3.5 tackles for loss and an interception last year.

SPECIALISTS

With no established kicker on the roster, Franklin had an open competition this offseason, looked to be won by walk-on Ryan Barker.

At punter the team returns All-Big Ten honorable mention Riley Thompson.

Singleton handled kick return duties last year while returning wide receiver Kaden Saunders manned punt return.



Head Coach: James Franklin

Year at Penn State: 12th

Record at Penn State: 88-39

Overall Record: 112-54

Bowl Record: 6-6

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Drew Allar, Jr. — The former top quarterback recruit in the country threw for 325 yards and three touchdowns in his first career start against WVU last season.

DE Abdul Carter, Jr. — A preseason All-Big Ten selection, Carter is shifting from linebacker to defensive end to exclusively rush the passer this year.

DT Zane Durant, Sr. — One of two sixth-year players at defensive tackle, Durant logged 5.5 tackles for loss and a pair of sacks last season.



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

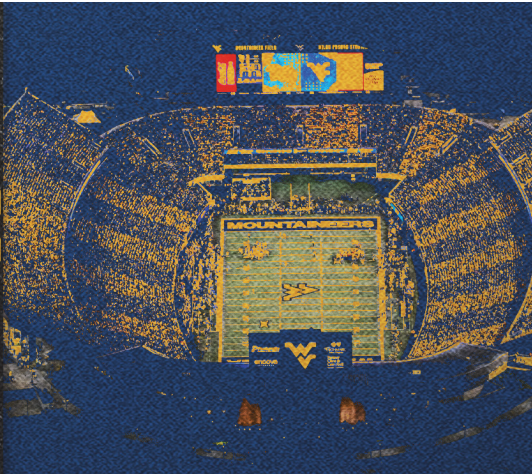
Penn State Nittany Lions quarterback Drew Allar.

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University of Albany

11-4 (7-1 CAA)



AP Photo

Albany wide receiver Jacari Carter playing for Georgia State last season.

BY CODY NESPOR

CNespor@DominionPost.com

There are no gimme games through the first two months of WVU's schedule and that includes 2023 FCS national semifinalist Albany.

The Mountaineers are a perfect 21-0 all-time against FCS opponents, but the Great Danes are coming off their best season in program history, going 11-4 and losing to eventual national champion South Dakota State in the FCS semi-finals.

Head coach Greg Gattuso is heading into his 11th year leading the Great Danes with 22 total years of head coaching experience split between Albany and Duquesne.

The Great Danes lost a lot of talent following last season. So much so that the team does not return a single defensive starter. Albany's semifinal run last year was powered by transfers, however, and it looks like Gattuso will try to repeat that feat with a large transfer class for 2024.

West Virginia is the only FBS opponent on Albany's schedule this season.

OFFENSE

Old Dominion transfer quarterback Reese Poffenbarger was outstanding last season, throwing for 3,603 yards and 36 touchdowns. Unfortunately for the Great Danes, he was good enough to get scooped up by Miami in the transfer portal.

In the mix to replace Poffenbarger are transfers Myles Burkett (Wisconsin) and Scott Lynch (Sacred Heart) and last year's backup, Trey Lindsey.



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Great Danes

Sept. 7 @ Milan Puskar Stadium

The stability on offense comes on the line, where Albany returns All-CAA selections Ozzie Hutchinson and Will Marotta as well as fellow starters Sean Dugery and Nolan Latulippe.

Reigning CAA Freshman of the Year Griffin Woodell returns at running back after posting 892 rushing yards, 255 receiving yards and 12 total touchdowns.

At receiver, transfers Jacari Carter (Georgia State), Jamal Cooley (Dartmouth) and Steven McGee (Jackson State) supplement returners MarQeese Dietz and Jackson Parker. Tight end Aaron Steinfeldt transferred in from Indiana.

DEFENSE

Albany owned one of the best FCS defenses last season, but do not return any full-time starters.

Linebacker Michel Lucien is the most experienced returner as the Great Danes will fill out the rest of the lineup with portal additions.

Safety DaeSean Winston also returns after breaking his arm in week two and missing most of 2023.

Up front, the team added Chiebuke Aduaka (Merrimack), Sean Morris (Morgan State) and Jack Iuloano (Penn).

With Lucien at linebacker there is Timon Akins (Arkansas Pine-Bluff), Dontae Lunan (Bryant) and Ronald Holmes (Delaware State).

The secondary consists of Kenekchukwu Ezimime (Alabama A&M), Thomas Joe-Kamara (Monmouth), Myles Bell (Marshall), Daiyaan Hawkins (Temple) and Chris Gales (Toledo).

SPECIALISTS

Placekicker John Opalko was 13-of-18 on field goals last season with a long of 46.

Punter Tyler Pastula graduated, leaving the door open for Steven Sadek, Michael Sbuttoni or Tyler Pucci to win the job.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

RB Griffin Woodell, Soph. — The reigning CAA Offensive Rookie of the Year recorded 892 rushing yards, 255 receiving yards and 12 total touchdowns.

WR Jacari Carter, Sr. — A former FCS Freshman All-American at Merrimack, Carter has 164 receptions for 1,529 yards and 13 touchdowns in his career.

OT Ozzie Hutchinson, Sr. — A second-team All-CAA selection after last season, he and guard Will Marotta return to lead an experienced offensive line.



Head Coach: Greg Gattuso

Year at Albany: 11th
Record at Albany: 50-61
Overall Record: 147-93

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University of Pittsburgh

3-9 (2-6 ACC)



AP Photo

Pittsburgh tight end Gavin Bartholomew.

BY CODY NESPOR

CNespor@DominionPost.com

To call the 2023 season a disappointment for Pitt would be a massive understatement.

Last season was an utter disaster for the Panthers, who look to pick up the pieces from that 3-9 campaign to rebound in 2024.

It was easily the worst season under 10th-year head coach Pat Narduzzi, whose 2021 ACC championship has kept him off the hot seat.

The Panthers open the season against Kent State and Cincinnati before hosting West Virginia in the all-important Backyard Brawl on Sept. 14.

A win over their bitter rival could help rid Pitt fans of the bad taste left in their mouths by 2023. On the flip side, a second-straight loss to the Mountaineers could be the spark that starts to warm up Narduzzi's seat.

OFFENSE

The old-school Narduzzi went out and hired a cutting-edge offensive coordinator this offseason in Kade Bell from FCS Western Carolina.

The Panther's need Bell's no-huddle, spread scheme to revitalize an offense that finished dead last in the ACC last season in yards (3,815), rushing (1,223) and points (20.2 per game).

The man running the offense will be junior quarterback Nate Yarnell, the Panthers' third attempt at finding a successor to Kenny Pickett.

Unlike the last two attempts, Yarnell is an in-house recruit rather than a transfer. He went 1-1 in two starts last season with 595 yards and four touchdowns.

Yarnell's top passing targets will be receiver Konata Mumpfield (44 catches, 576 yards) and tight end Gavin Bartholomew (18 and 326).

Pitt returns leading rusher Rodney Hammond Jr. (547 yards, four touchdowns) in an otherwise inexperienced backfield. Tackle Branson Taylor anchors and offensive line that returns four starters including Terrence Moore, Ryan Baer and Jason Collier.

DEFENSE

Typically strong under Narduzzi, Pitt's defense disappointed nearly as much as its offense last year, finishing 73rd nationally in scoring and falling from second to 27th in sacks.

With a coach like Narduzzi and a veteran coordinate in Randy Bates, a rebound would be expected from this unit, but the post-spring transfers of the Panthers' top lineman, Dayon Hayes (10.5 tackles for loss, four sacks), and linebacker, Solomon DeShields (58 tackles, eight tackles for loss), leaves the team with just two returning starters.

Those two returners are safety duo Donovan McMillon (105 tackles) and



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Panthers

Sept. 14 @ Acrisure Stadium

Javon McIntyre (85 tackles), the team's top two tacklers last season.

Brandon George returns at linebacker after posting 49 tackles and 4.5 tackles for loss last year. Special teams ace Ryland Gandy is expected to start at one of the cornerback spots.

SPECIALISTS

Pitt's current active scoring leader is junior kicker Ben Sauls at 171. He's made 31-of-40 field goals in his career, including 11-of-16 in 2023.

Caleb Junko returns to handle puntin duties after booting the ball 63 times last year at an average of 41.6 yards.



Head Coach: Pat Narduzzi

Year at Pitt: 10th

Record at Pitt: 65-50

Overall Record: 65-50

Bowl Record: 2-4

PLAYERS TO WATCH

RB Rodney Hammond Jr., Sr. — Ran for 74 yards and two touchdowns in the 2022 Backyard Brawl, but was slowed to just 547 yards last season.

TE Gavin Bartholomew, Sr — The talented tight end might benefit the most from Pitt's scheme change. His production has fallen three years in a row, but could spike this season.

S Donovan McMillon, Sr. — One of the top tacklers in the ACC last season and one of only two returning starters on Pitt's defense for 2024.



AP Photo

Pittsburgh defensive back Donovan McMillon.

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University of Kansas

9-4 (5-4 Big 12)



AP Photo

Kansas cornerbacks Cobee Bryant (2) and Mello Dotson (3).

BY CODY NESPOR

CNespor@DominionPost.com

The Kansas Jayhawks find themselves in a very similar position as West Virginia.

Like the Mountaineers, Kansas made the jump up to nine wins last season, firmly establishing the Jayhawks in the top half of the Big 12. And just like WVU, the Jayhawks want to go a step further this season and seriously contend for a conference championship.

The days of KU dwelling in the basement of the Big 12 are long gone. In three short years, head coach Lance Leipold has taken the team from 0-9 in 2020 and 2-10 in 2021 to nine wins and a No. 22 preseason ranking.

OFFENSE

The best news for the Jayhawks is the return of star quarterback Jalon Daniels. The senior missed all but three games last season after being named the Big 12 Player of the Year in 2022.

Health has always been Daniels' biggest concern as he's never played more than nine games in a season. When he's out there, however, he's one of the best playmakers in the country.

In a conference flush with talented halfbacks, KU's Devin Neal doesn't get the recognition he deserves. Back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons has him less than 800 yards away from breaking the team's all-time rushing record.

Neal had nearly 1,500 yards from scrimmage last season with 17 total touchdowns. He and Daniels make for a deadly backfield combination.

The team's top three receivers from last year all return in Lawrence Arnold (782 yards), Quentin Skinner (587) and Luke Grimm (555).

Wisconsin transfer Logan Brown missed all of last season with an injury, but has impressed as left tackle. He anchors an offensive line with two returning starters, Michael Ford Jr. and Bryce Cabeldue.

DEFENSE

A solid unit last season, the Jayhawks were middle-of-the road in the Big 12 in points allowed (26.5 per game) but fourth in yards (378.2) and interceptions (14) and third in sacks (27). The challenge in 2024 will be replacing a handful of productive players from last season.

Top cornerbacks Mello Dotson and Cobee Bryant (four interceptions each) both return as one of the top duos in the country. Both were preseason All-Big 12 selections.

Leading tackler Kenny Logan (95) and top pass rusher Austin Booker (eight sacks) are gone, however.

Jerome Robinson is the top returner on the defensive line after posting 4.5 sacks in 2023. JB Brown had 57 total tackles at linebacker last season.

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Jayhawks

Sept. 21 @ Milan Puskar Stadium

The highest rated recruit in Kansas history, four-star edge DJ Warner, could factor in as well.

SPECIALISTS

Owen Piepergerdes steps in at kicker to replace the consistent Seth Keller. The junior is 15-for-15 on extra points in his career and has hit one of two field goal attempts.

Australian Damon Greaves punted as a true freshman last season. He averaged 39 yards per punt with 20 fair catches and 11 inside the 20.



Head Coach: Lance Leipold

Year at Kansas: 4th
Record at Kansas: 17-21
Overall Record: 163-60
Bowl Record: 3-2

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Jalon Daniels, Sr. — The Jayhawk offense begins with Daniels. He's missed 12 games over the last two years, but the 2022 Big 12 Player of the Year is one of the best in the country when healthy.

RB Devin Neal, Sr. — Less than 800 yards away from becoming KU's all-time leading rusher, Neal is one of the best tailbacks in a conference full of talented runners.

CB Cobee Bryant/Millo Dotson, Sr. — It's hard to separate these two, who make up one of the best corner pairings in the country. Both had four interceptions last year and were preseason All-Big 12 selections.



AP Photo

Kansas quarterback Jalon Daniels.



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Oklahoma State University

10-4 (7-2 Big 12)



Oklahoma State running back Ollie Gordon II.

AP Photo

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

JJackson@DominionPost

It is often thought that Oklahoma and Texas carried the banner for the Big 12 football teams, but you'll have to excuse Oklahoma State coach Mike Gundy if he differs with that opinion.

Since the start of 2020, the Cowboys have contended for three Big 12 titles and played in two conference championship games, while going 3-1 in bowl games.

It's brought up, because both Texas and Oklahoma have left the league for the SEC, but the Cowboys appear ready to pick up the slack.

Armed with 10 returning starters on defense and an offense led by Doak Walker winner Ollie Gordon II, Oklahoma State's potential could carry it to a Big 12 championship and a trip to the College Football Playoffs.

OFFENSE

It starts with Gordon, who led the Big 12 in rushing last season with 1,732 yards and 21 touchdowns, making him the Big 12's favorite for Heisman contention.

Beyond Gordon, the entire Oklahoma State offensive line returns intact, led by tackle Dalton Cooper and center Joe Michalski, both all-Big 12 first-team preseason selections. Another note: Not only do all five starters on the line return, they're all fifth-year seniors.

Quarterback Alan Bowman goes beyond a fifth-year guy, he's actually in his seventh year of college ball. He's had other stops at Texas Tech and Michigan, before throwing for 3,460 yards and 15 touchdowns for the Cowboys last season.

He'll have senior Brennan Presley back as his favorite target. All he did last season was lead the Big 12 with 101 receptions that went for 991 yards and six touchdowns.

Oklahoma State was eighth in the league last year, averaging 431.8 yards per game, but with a balanced attack, the Cowboys will likely surpass those numbers this season.

DEFENSE

OK, first the good news: Oklahoma State returns 10 starters, including the entire secondary and linebacker positions.

The bad news: Those 10 starters are coming back from a defense that ranked last in the Big 12 last season, allowing nearly 442 yards per game.

Linebacker Nick Martin is the name to watch, as he finished sixth in the nation last season with 140 tackles. Next to him is Collin Oliver, who was a Big 12 first-team preseason pick.

Safeties Kendal Daniels and Trey Rucker also both topped 100 tackles last



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Cowboys

Oct. 5 @ Boone Pickens Stadium

season, but the Cowboys have got to be better against the pass, where they gave up 275 yards per game last season.

The interesting newcomer will be Division II transfer Obi Ezeigbo, a defensive lineman who had 14 sacks last year at Gannon (Pa.) University, but will have to prove himself at the Division I level.

SPECIALISTS

Presely averaged 19.5 yards per kickoff return a year ago, so there's no reason to think OSU is worried about the return game.

Hudson Kaak and Wes Pahl split time at punter and both return.

The only hole is at kicker, where Alex Hale put up 117 points and was 3 for 4 from 50 yards or longer on field goals. Logan Ward, a junior who was 7 for 7 on extra-points attempts last season, will likely take that spot.



Head Coach: Mike Gundy

Year at Oklahoma State: 20th

Record at Oklahoma State: 166-79

Overall Record: 166-79

Bowl Record: 12-6

PLAYERS TO WATCH

RB Ollie Gordon II, Jr. — The Big 12 Preseason Player of the Year after rushing for 1,732 yards and 21 touchdowns. Also caught 30 passes for 330 yards. Had two games with more than 250 yards rushing and three with more than 150.

WR Brennan Presley, Sr. — Bypassed a shot at the NFL Draft last season to return for his senior year. Caught 101 passes and has 225 receptions for his career. He needs 69 more this season to set the school's career record. Also a dangerous punt and kick returner.

QB Alan Bowman, Sr. — May hold the key to how far OSU rides this season. He's in his seventh season, but had 14 interceptions to go along with 15 TD passes last season. That's been a knock on him his whole career, with 49 TD passes against 32 interceptions.



AP Photo

Oklahoma State quarterback Alan Bowman.

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Iowa State University

7-6 (6-3 Big 12)



Iowa State quarterback Rocco Becht.

AP Photo

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

JJackson@DominionPost.com

Matt Campbell is not that far removed from being one of the top names for coaching vacancies around the country.

If Iowa State is to pull closer to national relevancy, Campbell has got to find a way to win nonconference games to go along with Big 12 success.

A year ago, the Cyclones were one victory shy of playing in the Big 12 title game. In 2020, Iowa State was in the league championship game against Oklahoma.

In both seasons, Iowa State suffered embarrassing nonconference losses to Ohio (last year) and Louisiana (2020). Campbell has beaten Iowa just one time in his eight seasons with the Cyclones.

If that changes this year, it will be because quarterback Rocco Becht took another step forward after being named the Big 12's Freshman of the Year in 2023 and the Cyclones' defense remains a dominant force.

OFFENSE

Becht's finest game as a freshman came in the bowl game loss against Memphis, in which he threw for 446 yards and three touchdowns.

He finished with three games with more than 300 yards on his way to 3,120 passing yards and 23 TDs.

As he continues to mature, Iowa State has plenty to go around him, including senior Jayden Higgins, an all-Big 12 preseason first-teamer after collecting 983 yards on 53 receptions last year.

Jaylin Noel (820 yards) also returns, as does sophomore tight end Ben Brahmer, giving Iowa State one of the top receiving units in the Big 12.

Iowa State also returns its entire offensive line from last year with guard Jarrod Hufford being the only senior in that bunch.

They'll be blocking for running back Abu Sama III, who just might be the best runner in the Big 12 you haven't heard of.

He had just 84 carries as a true freshman, but used those limited attempts to average 7.3 yards per carry. Sama led Iowa State in rushing with 614 yards and scored six times.

He gained 276 yards on just 16 attempts in the regular-season finale against Kansas State.

DEFENSE

This is Iowa State's calling card under Campbell. A year ago, the Cyclones were No. 2 in the Big 12 in total defense. In 2022, Iowa State was tops in the conference.

Iowa State returns nine starters from a defense that allowed just 363 total yards and 22 points per game.

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Cyclones

Oct. 12 @ Milan Puskar Stadium

Free safety Jeremiah Cooper leads the way after picking off five passes and registering 45 tackles last season. He's an all-Big 12 first-team pick.

The problem last year was getting pressure on the quarterback. Iowa State ranked 11th in the Big 12 with just 21 sacks.

Louisiana Monroe transfer Kenard Snyder may help in that area, but the Cyclones have experienced linemen Joey Petersen, Tyler Onyedim also returning.

The linebackers are the least experienced spot on defense, with former walk-on Caleb Bacon sliding in at middle linebacker after recording 60 tackles last season.

Along with Cooper, the secondary is tight with returning starters Myles Purchase, Beau Freyler and Malik Verdon coming back.

That group was tied for second in the Big 12 last season with 16 interceptions and they allowed just 229 passing yards per game.

SPECIALISTS

The question will be at kicker, where Florida Atlantic transfer Carter Davis was brought in to compete. Noel averaged 27.2 yards per kick return last season.



Head Coach: Matt Campbell

Year at Iowa State: 10th

Record at Iowa State: 53-48

Overall Record: 88-63

Bowl Record: 4-5

PLAYERS TO WATCH

RB Abu Sama III, Soph. — Averaged 7.3 yards per carry last season and led Iowa State in rushing yards despite getting only 84 carries.

WR Jayden Higgins, Sr. — Caught 53 passes for 983 yards and six touchdowns last season in his first season with the Cyclones after transferring from Eastern Kentucky. An all-Big 12 preseason first-team selection.

QB Rocco Becht, Soph. — The son of former WVU standout Anthony Becht, the sophomore is coming off a season in which he threw for 3,120 yards and 23 touchdowns against just eight interceptions.



AP Photo

Iowa State defensive back Jeremiah Cooper.

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Kansas State University

9-4 (6-3 Big 12)



Kansas State quarterback Avery Johnson.

AP Photo

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

JJackson@DominionPost.com

By preseason standards Kansas State is either overly respected or overly balanced with talent.

There is a good argument behind each case in that the Wildcats were picked second behind Utah in the preseason Big 12 media poll, receiving 19 first-place votes.

Yet when you look at the media's Big 12 preseason first team, not a single Kansas State player is listed.

What we do know is the Wildcats return four starters on offense and seven on a defense that allowed just 21 points per game last season.

Head coach Chris Kleiman promoted offensive line coach Conor Riley as the team's third offensive coordinator in as many seasons, and Riley will be charged with developing sophomore quarterback Avery Johnson.

Kansas State, which finished 9-4 last season and beat N.C. State in the Pop-Tarts Bowl, will also have the weird distinction of playing new Big 12 member Arizona in a nonconference game.

The two-game series — signed back in 2016 — will also be a nonconference matchup in 2025, too.

OFFENSE

The dual-threat Johnson was used as Will Howard's backup until the bowl game, but he certainly made the most of the limited action he saw last season.

He completed 56% of his throws for 479 yards and five touchdowns with no interceptions, while adding 296 yards rushing and seven more scores.

A year ago, Johnson came in as a four-star recruit ranked as the No. 77 prospect nationally by ESPN. With starter Will Howard having transferred to Ohio State, the offense now belongs to Johnson.

There is help from the running game in junior D.J. Giddens, who rushed for 1,226 yards and 10 touchdowns. He capped off last season with four consecutive 100-yard rushing games and also had 207 yards against UCF earlier in the season.

The receiving corps is experienced, but will miss tight end Ben Sinnott, who was a second-round pick by Washington.

The leading returner is Jayce Brown, who had 27 catches for 437 yards and three touchdowns last season. K-State also added Penn State transfer Dante Cephas to the fold.

The offensive line returns two starters in guard Hadley Panzer and tackle Carver Willis.



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Wildcats

Oct. 19 @ Milan Puskar Stadium

DEFENSE

If K-State is to challenge for the Big 12 title, its defense will lead the way. The Wildcats return four of their top five tacklers from last season, including safety Marques Sigle and linebacker Austin Moore, who both led the team last season with 63 tackles.

The depth is in the secondary, where cornerback Jacob Parrish (44 tackles, 4 interceptions) returns, as does strong safety V.J. Payne (57 tackles).

Ball State transfer Jordan Riley recorded 155 tackles over the last two seasons and will make an impact as well in the K-State secondary.

There is also good depth up front, where seniors Brendan Mott and Uso Seumalo return.

The problem is K-State didn't generate much of a pass rush last season, finishing with just 25 quarterback sacks. This is the one area K-State must improve to make a run at the playoffs.

Junior-college transfer Malcom Alcorn-Crowder could help in that area. Ranked as the No. 5 overall junior-college prospect, Crowder will give the Wildcats plenty of size at 6-foot-6 and 300 pounds.

SPECIALISTS

Chris Tennant worked his way into the starting kicking role last season and finished 5 of 6 on field goals beyond 40 yards.

Simon McClannan is a freshman who is expected to take over the punting duties, but the Wildcats are searching for kick and punt returners after Phillip Brooks graduated and moved on to the NFL.

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Avery Johnson, Soph. — Must improve as a passer (he completed just 56% of his throws last year), but is already accomplished as a runner. In his only start last season, Johnson rushed for 71 yards and a TD to help the Wildcats beat N.C. State in the Pop-Tarts Bowl.

RB D.J. Giddens, Jr. — K-State always seem to have a powerful and talented running back and Giddens (6-foot-1, 212 pounds) fits that mold. Rushed for 1,226 yards last season and also caught 29 passes for 323 yards. Averaged 5.5 yards per carry last season.

FS Marques Sigle, Sr. — Led the team with 63 tackles, while also adding an interceptions and nine passes defended.



AP Photo

Kansas State linebacker Austin Moore.



Head Coach: Chris Klieman

Year at Kansas State: 7th

Record at Kansas State: 39-24

Overall Record: 111-37

Bowl Record: 2-2



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University of Arizona

10-3 (7-2 Pac-12)



AP Photo

Arizona wide receiver Tetairoa McMillan.

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

JJackson@DominionPost.com

Brent Brennan's career record as a head coach is 34-48, which covers his seven seasons at San Jose State.

He's now in his first season in charge at Arizona, which is in its first year in the Big 12. If that sounds like a recipe for disaster, maybe.

Behind the scenes, what Brennan inherited is a talented team that averaged nearly 450 yards and 35 points per game last season on offense and a stingy defense that allowed less than 21 points per game.

It could make for a smoother-than-expected transition into the Big 12, which what's expected after the Wildcats were picked fifth in the preseason poll.

OFFENSE

Leading the way will be sophomore quarterback Noah Fifta, who didn't become the Wildcats starter until the fourth game of last season.

What he did from there was remarkable with five games with 300 or more yards passing, including 527 against rival Arizona State and then added 354 against a win against Oklahoma in the Alamo Bowl.

He completed 72.4% of his passes and threw for 2,869 yards and 25 touchdowns against just six interceptions.

His leading receiver in Tetairoa McMillan returns. He caught 90 passes for 1,402 yards and 10 touchdowns and is an all-Big 12 preseason first-teamer.

The offensive line is solid with three returning starters, including Jonah Savaiinaea at tackle. He's a Big 12 preseason first-team pick, too.

The biggest question will be at running back. Last season's leading rusher, Jonah Coleman, transferred to Washington.

Brennan brought Quali Conley with him from San Jose State, where he rushed for 842 yards last season. Jordan Washington, an incoming freshman and one of the team's top recruits, could also play a major role early.

DEFENSE

The secondary leads the way with four returning starters, including cornerback Tacario Davis who broke up 15 passes last season.

Davis is an all-Big 12 preseason first-team selection, as is linebacker Jacob Manu, who finished with 105 tackles and 6.5 quarterback sacks last season.

Getting back to the secondary, the Wildcats were third in the Pac-12 last season, allowing just 229 passing yards per game.

Dalton Johnson (86 tackles) returns at safety.

Treydan Stukes and Gunner Maldonado — they combined for 134 tackles — also return at safety in the Wildcats' 3-3-5 alignment.

The big hole is up front, where three potential starters transferred to Washington.



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Wildcats

Oct. 26 @ Arizona Stadium

Tre Smith was an all-Mountain West selection last season and he followed Brennan to Arizona. Ta'ita'i Uiagalelei was a backup at Arizona last season who will be counted on as a physical defensive end.

SPECIALISTS

Tyler Loop may be the most consistent kicker in the Big 12, which is why he was a preseason first-team selection. He's made 49 of his 57 field-goal attempts over his career and he's never missed an extra-point conversion. Cash Peterman is transitioning from kicker to punter. He began his career as a kicker at BYU, before transferring to Arizona in 2022.



Head Coach: Brent Brennan
Year at Arizona: 1st
Record at Arizona: 0-0
Overall Record: 34-48
Bowl Record: 0-3

PLAYERS TO WATCH

QB Noah Fifita, Soph. — One of the most accurate passers in the country after completing 72.4% of his passes last year as a freshman. He threw 25 touchdowns and had just six interceptions.

WR Tetairoa McMillan, Jr. — Caught 90 passes for 1,402 yards last season. Has great size at 6-foot-5 and 210 pounds. He's got 18 touchdown grabs for his career. He's also a perfect 3 for 3 passing over his career and has a TD pass.

K Tyler Loop, Sr. — Enters his senior season with 250 career points. A model of consistency who was 16 of 17 last season on field goals of less than 40 yards. He's never missed a PAT and his career long field goal is 52 yards.



AP Photo

Arizona quarterback Noah Fifita.



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University of Cincinnati

3-9 (1-8 Big 12)



Cincinnati running back Corey Kiner.

AP Photo

BY MATTHEW PEASLEE

Sports@DominionPost.com

There's nowhere to go but up for the Cincinnati Bearcats in their second season in the Big 12 in 2024. Last season was a rude awakening for UC, making the jump from the American Athletic Conference to the Big 12.

The Bearcats did start off the year 2-0, including a win at Pitt, but lost seven straight after that. Cincinnati picked up just one conference win a year ago — beating Houston 24-14 on the road — in Scott Satterfield's first season as head coach. He looks to revamp many schemes and positions and is still figuring out who will lead the offense heading into 2024.

There are more questions than answers again for the Bearcats, who are still just three seasons removed from a berth in the College Football Playoffs. Getting back there, though, still seems like it could be light-years away.

OFFENSE

The brightest spot for the Bearcats is their running game. The unit ranked fifth in the nation last season with 217 yards per game — averaging five yards per rushing attempt.

The entire offensive line returns, as does last season's top rusher in Corey Kiner. He's a Cincinnati native who previously played at LSU. Kiner finished with 1,047 yards and five touchdowns in his junior season. He will be accompanied by Ohio State transfer Evan Pryor, who comes in to UC for his redshirt junior season.

There's a brewing quarterback battle between last year's main backup Brady Lichtenberg and Indiana transfer Brendan Sorsby. Lichtenberg made his first collegiate start in 2023 at West Virginia — a 42-21 loss. Sorsby was 135 for 236 passing for 1,587 yards and 15 touchdowns for the Hoosiers last season. Top receiving targets look to be Tony Johnson, a transfer from FAU, and Tyrin Smith, a transfer from UTEP, as well as returning starter Xzavier Henderson who had 782 receiving yards last year.

DEFENSE

The UC defense is a rebuilding unit with new defensive coordinator Tyson Veidt making some changes.

Former WVU linebacker Jared Bartlett leads a hefty transfer group. Bartlett made 26 tackles in 10 games for the Mountaineers last season. Derrick Canteen, Mekhi Miller, Logan Wilson, Joshua Minkins and Kye Stokes also came to Cincinnati via the transfer portal and have earned starting roles.

Dontay Corleone, Eric Phillips, Jack Dingle and Jordan Young are the only returning starters on defense. Nicknamed "The Godfather," Corleone finished with 39 total tackles last year, with three sacks. He enters the season as a preseason All-American and All-Big 12 selection, though injuries may sideline

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Bearcats

Nov. 9 @ Nippert Stadium

him for the first few games. The Bearcats allowed 30 points per game last season — 100th in the country.

SPECIALISTS

Cincinnati has one of the top punters in the nation in Mason Fletcher. The Australia native punted 45 times for 1,935 yards last season, including 23 punts downed inside the 20 yard line. He did not record a touchback and averaged 43 yards per punt. Carter Brown returns for his second season as the Bearcats main field goal kicker. He was 15 of 19 last season and a perfect 30 for 30 on PAT attempts.



Head Coach: Scott Satterfield

Year at Cincinnati: 2nd

Record at Cincinnati: 3-9

Overall Record: 79-57

Bowl Record: 4-1

PLAYERS TO WATCH

DE Mikah Coleman, Jr. — In three seasons at Eastern Michigan, Mikah Coleman collected 50 tackles in 28 games. He started off last season hot with two tackles for a loss against Minnesota and really developed into his 6-foot-4, 265-pound frame as the season progressed. If he can develop more at the Power 5 level, he could be a top defensive player in the Big 12.

OG Luke Kandra, Sr. — One of the returning offensive linemen, Luke Kandra is regarded as one of the top guards in the country. He played three seasons at Louisville before coming to UC last year and recorded 79 knock-downs on a run-blocking grade of 82.1.

RB Corey Kiner, Sr. — As the Bearcats develop their identity in 2024, they'll go as Corey Kiner goes. If he can be as reliable as he was in 2023, and take a big step forward, the team will improve by leaps and bounds from last season.



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

Cincinnati linebacker Jared Bartlett playing for West Virginia last season.

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Baylor University

3-9 (2-7 Big 12)



Baylor Bears linebacker Matt Jones.

AP Photo

BY MATTHEW PEASLEE
Sports@DominionPost.com

The hot seat is sizzling for Baylor head coach Dave Aranda. Heading into his fifth season with the Bears, Aranda is 23-25 (15-21 Big 12) and coming off an 11th place finish in the conference.

It seems like two decades, as opposed to just two years, since the Bears beat Oklahoma State in the Big 12 title game and won the Sugar Bowl against Ole Miss. The 2023 Bears lost seven of eight games and finished the campaign on a five-game losing streak.

Baylor has just two nonconference games, opening up with Tarleton State, which only started playing Division I FCS football in 2020, and Air Force in Week 3. The Bears travel to Utah in Week 2 for the Utes' first game as a member of the Big 12.

OFFENSE

There are five new coaches on the offensive staff, including former WVU assistant Jake Spavital who was hired as the Baylor offensive coordinator. Spavital will look to keep things up-tempo, playing fast by relying on strong quarterback play and a group of talented receivers.

Five of the top receivers return, including leader Monaray Baldwin, who had 600 yards and four touchdowns last season. Ketron Jackson Jr., Hal Pressley, Ashtyn Hawkins and Josh Cameron are the other big-play targets.

That group will have to develop chemistry with new quarterback Dequan Finn, who is the reigning MAC player of the year after three strong seasons at Toledo.

Last year's starting QB Blake Shapen transferred to Mississippi State. In turn, the Bears' backup will be Sawyer Robertson, who started four games last season, but began his collegiate career at Mississippi State.

DEFENSE

Coming from a defensive background, being the defensive coordinator of LSU's national championship in 2019, Aranda plans on taking more charge on that side of the ball in 2024.

Young defensive coordinator Mat Powledge has already been there for two seasons, but Aranda is planning to step in and set formations this year. The defense ranked 115th last season, surrendering 421 yards per game.

The leader of the unit is linebacker Matt Jones, who led the team with 82 tackles last year.

Another bright spot on defense was cornerback Caden Jenkins, who was a freshman All-American. Up front, there are some pieces being put in place with new starters in Trey Wilson, Cooper Lanz and Treven Ma'ae.



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Bears

Nov. 16 @ Milan Puskar Stadium

SPECIALISTS

Isaiah Hankins may have been the hero on last year's 3-9 campaign. He drilled a 25-yard field goal in the final minute of a Sept. 30 game at UCF, lifting the Bears to a 36-35 victory, overcoming an early 21-point hole to secure the largest comeback in program history.

Hankins was quite reliable in other situations, going 18 of 25 on field goal and only missing two extra points. Palmer Williams had a long punt of 53 yards and averaged right around 40 yards per punt in his true freshman season. Junior Richard Reese returned two kickoffs for touchdowns against West Virginia last season, and the Bears brought in Nevada transfer Jamaal Bell, who tallied 1,712 yards in kick returns in his career there.



Head Coach: Dave Aranda

Year at Baylor: 5th

Record at Baylor: 23-25

Overall Record: 23-25

Bowl Record: 1-1

PLAYERS TO WATCH

LB Matt Jones, Sr. — Matt Jones has started all games the past two years for Baylor. In his career, he has 214 total tackles, 25 tackles for a loss and eight sacks as he heads into his sixth year of eligibility.

QB Dequan Finn, Sr. — In his first year at the Power 5 level, Dequan Finn has a chance to prove himself at the highest level. Having dominated the MAC at Toledo, he is already turning heads in camp being one of 36 QBs named to the Davey O'Brien Award Watch List.

WR Hal Presley, Sr. — Hal Presley played in Baylor's first six games last year, but suffered a season-ending injury. He caught 17 passes for 222 yards in the games he played and his absence was felt on offense in the second half of the season. In three total years at Baylor, he has 50 catches for 619 yards and four touchdowns.



AP Photo

Baylor quarterback Dequan Finn playing at Toledo last season.

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University of Central Florida

6-7 (3-6 Big 12)



Central Florida defensive back Demari Henderson.

AP Photo

BY MATTHEW PEASLEE

Sports@DominionPost.com

In its first taste of Power 5 football, UCF rose to the challenge better than some other newcomers. In all, the 2023 season wasn't up to par with the Knights' previous success in the American Athletic Conference and Conference USA before that, but a 6-7 overall record is nothing to scoff at.

UCF has the potential to compete in the Big 12 and the 2024 season may be the first chance to truly show it. The Knights retain most of their playmakers from last year and could turn things around quickly as they face all four newcomers to the Big 12.

They have a favorable schedule early on, facing FCS New Hampshire and Sam Houston from Conference USA. To start October, though, UCF heads to The Swamp to take on Florida as a rare out-of-conference game in the middle of the Big 12 slate.

OFFENSE

The offense runs — literally — through running back RJ Harvey. He is the focal point of the ground game and the entire offensive attack.

The senior from Orlando rushed for nearly 1,500 yards and 16 touchdowns last year. He busted out a long run of 92 yards in a surprising 45-3 victory over nationally ranked Oklahoma State. The Knights racked up nearly 3,000 rushing yards last year and averaged 31 points per game.

Kobe Hudson led the team with eight touchdown catches last year and Xavier Townsend saw a lot of action, with 33 receptions. A new quarterback will be getting them the ball following the departure of John Rhys Plumlee, who recently signed with the Pittsburgh Steelers. Another veteran is coming in, though, as KJ Jefferson, a three-year starter at Arkansas, comes in at QB for UCF. Jefferson saw his overall numbers dip a bit from his first two years with the Razorbacks, but still threw for more than 2,100 yards last year, with 19 touchdowns.

The Knights were a solid offensive team in 2023, checking in at No. 8 in the country in total offense, but they also had a hard time holding onto the football with 13 fumbles, losing seven.

DEFENSE

Five talented transfers highlight the defense for UCF — lineman Nyjalik Kelly came in from Miami, linebacker Josiah Pierre came in from Texas Tech, linebacker Ethan Barr came in from Vanderbilt, linebacker Deshawn Pace came in from Cincinnati and cornerback Ladarius Tennison came in from Ole Miss.

New defensive coordinator Ted Roof was a colleague with head coach Gus Malzahn on the 2010 Auburn national championship team so that familiar, and



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Golden Knights

Nov. 23 @ Milan Puskar Stadium

successful blood should turn things around for the 2024 Knights. UCF lost its top defensive player, Jason Johnson, who had 115 total tackles, and he now plays for the Dallas Cowboys.

Overall, the defense saw just what it takes to hang with the high-powered offenses of the Big 12, and the Knights weren't always up to the task, surrendering almost 200 rushing yards per game last year.

SPECIALISTS

An Australian punter, Mitch McCarthy, leads the kicking game and Colten Boomer returns for the field goals. Xavier Townsend is the top return man with an average of 29 yards per kick return and nine yards per punt return.



Head Coach: Gus Malzahn

Year at UCF: 4th

Record at UCF: 24-16

Overall Record: 101-54

Bowl Record: 3-7

PLAYERS TO WATCH

DL Ricky Barber, Sr. — The redshirt senior checks in at 6-foot-3 and nearly 300 pounds. After battling through some injuries, he is looking now to be a centerpiece of the defense. He had just 18 tackles last season, but made his presence felt in the Gaspirilla Bowl game loss to Georgia Tech, which should fire him up to lead in 2024.

RB RJ Harvey, Sr. — He could be one of the top offensive players in the Big 12 and has been a multi-time finalist for the Doak Walker Award. Averaged over six yards per rush last year.

S Demari Henderson, Jr. — He's fast and nimble in the UCF secondary. He had three interceptions last year, including two in the win against Oklahoma State.



AP Photo

Central Florida defensive tackle Ricky Barber.

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Texas Tech University

7-6 (5-4 Big 12)



Texas Tech running back Tahj Brooks.

AP Photo

BY MATTHEW PEASLEE
Sports@DominionPost.com

Joey McGuire has two years under his belt as head coach of Texas Tech and in year three, the Red Raiders are ready to make the jump to the top of the Big 12.

They went to a bowl game in each of his first two years, and the expectations are high this season in Lubbock — though there is some rebuilding to do.

The Red Raiders have just nine returning starters — five on offense and four on defense — and their former starting quarterback, Tyler Shough, transferred to Louisville.

But navigating roster management is something all college coaches must do, and McGuire has brought in a haul of transfers to fill the holes on both sides of the ball. Twenty three transfers left the program, but 16 came in — all with a high pedigree who will see action, and make an impact, right away.

OFFENSE

Turnovers doomed the Red Raiders, so a new look to the offense in 2024 may not be a bad thing. They committed 13 fumbles and 18 interceptions last season.

Behren Morton will be the starting quarterback after seeing some time at the end of 2023. The centerpiece of the offense is Tajh Brooks, who racked up more than 1,500 yards and 10 touchdowns.

Transfer receivers include Josh Kelly from Washington State, Caleb Douglas from Florida and Jalin Conyers from Arizona State.

Most of the offensive line are transfers too with Vinny Sciury, Sterling Porcer and Davion Cater all coming in from lower-level schools, but will be starters right away.

If the newcomers can mesh together quickly and Brooks continues his dominance on the ground, the Red Raiders could be the top rushing team in the Big 12.

DEFENSE

For as much as Texas Tech turned the ball over, its defense in 2023 forced even more miscues, creating 15 fumbles for opposing offenses and 24 sacks for a total loss of 184 yards.

The Red Raiders were 5-1 when allowing fewer than 25 points last year. Returning from that team are linebackers Ben Roberts, a freshman All-American who tallied over 100 tackles, and Jacob Rodriguez as well as secondary stars in safety CJ Baskerville and cornerback Bralyn Lux.

Up front, senior Quincy Ledet will get his first opportunity to start, and sophomores Chapman Lewis and Maurin Horn will see a bulk of the playing time in the secondary after making significant impacts as freshmen.



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Red Raiders

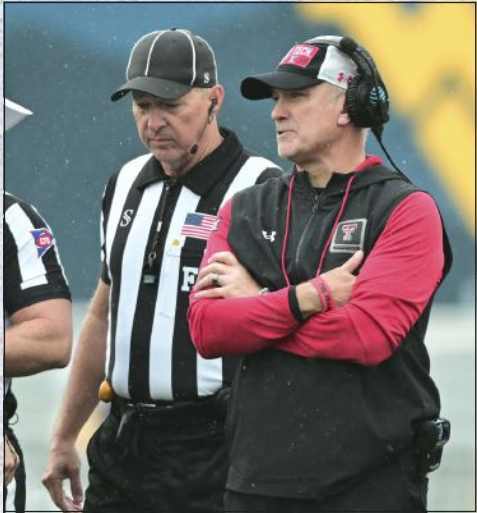
Nov. 30 @ Jones AT&T Stadium

SPECIALISTS

Kicker Gino Garcia hit all 40 PAT attempts but was just 16 of 22 on his field goals, though only one miss came during Big 12 play.

Jack Burgess will be the main punter after transferring in from Weber State.

Coy Eakin looks to return punts and the speedy Drae McCray will return kicks.



Head Coach: Joey McGuire

Year at Texas Tech: 3rd

Record at Texas Tech: 15-11

Overall Record: 15-11

Bowl Record: 2-0

PLAYERS TO WATCH

RB Tahj Brooks, Sr. — Entering his final year of eligibility, Tahj Brooks needs 1,167 rushing yards to become the program's all-time leader. He has 28 touchdowns in his four previous years at Texas Tech.

LB Ben Roberts, Soph. — Ben Roberts was the team's leading tackler as a freshman in 2023. He also had two sacks and an interception.

OL Sheridan Wilson, Soph. — He will be the team's starter at center as a sophomore, but only played in two games last year. Once he adjusts, he will be a main reason for Texas Tech's offensive success.



AP Photo

Texas Tech linebacker Ben Roberts.

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Offensive Assistants

Matt Moore, assistant head coach/offensive line coach

Matt Moore, a 2023 Broyles Award nominee as one of the top assistant coaches in the nation, is in his sixth year on the Mountaineer staff as the offensive line coach and fifth year as the assistant head coach.

In 2023, WVU's offensive line led the way for the Mountaineer offense to lead the Power Five in rushing yards



(2,976). In Big 12 games, WVU was the only school to finish with more than 2,000 rushing yards (2,211) and it has the longest streak of games with 140 or more yards rushing (16), three more than any other team. It also led the league in rushing yards per game (245.7) and was tied for first in rushing touchdowns (24).

Bilal Marshall, wide receivers coach

Bilal Marshall is in his second year on the Mountaineer coaching staff as the receivers coach. He was a graduate assistant on Neal Brown's coaching staff in 2020 and 2021, working with the wide receivers.

In 2023, the Mountaineers had two players ranked in the top 16 in yards per reception in FBS (Hudson Clement - No. 3, 21.82 yards per recep-



tion and Devin Carter - No. 16, 18.56 yards per reception).

The Mountaineers averaged 15.02 passing yards per completion, ranking No. 2 in the Big 12 and No. 3 among Power 5 schools.

Marshall rejoined the Mountaineers football coaching staff as the receivers coach in January 2023.

Tyler Allen, quarterbacks coach

Tyler Allen is in his first year as the quarterbacks coach at WVU and the fourth year on the Mountaineers football coaching staff.

Allen returned to WVU in August 2022 as an offensive analyst and added the title of special assistant to the head coach in the 2023 spring.

During that time, Allen organized, implemented and maintained all



aspects of game analysis for the offensive coaching staff and managed the walk-on program.

He charted/tracked statistics during practice and competition, ana-

lyzed game film and formulated game plans to assist the offensive coaching staff with game preparation.

Blaine Stewart, tight ends coach

Blaine Stewart is in his second year on the Mountaineers coaching staff as the tight ends coach.

Kole Taylor earned All-Big 12 Second-Team honors, while leading the team in receptions, ranking No. 3 in receiving yards and yards per game and tying for first in receiving touchdowns with four.

From 2018-22, Stewart was a coach-



ing assistant on Mike Tomlin's staff in Pittsburgh, and he brings a total of five years of NFL experience with him to Morgantown.

He is the son of the late West Virginia

head football coach Bill Stewart, who led the Mountaineers to a 28-12 (.700) three-year record from 2008-10.

Coach bios courtesy of WVU Athletics

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Defensive Assistants

ShaDon Brown, co-defensive coordinator/secondary coach

ShaDon Brown is in his fourth year as the co-defensive coordinator and oversees the secondary.

In 2023, the West Virginia defense showed improvement, giving up six fewer points a game than the prior year.

In Brown's first year as the Mountaineers' secondary coach, WVU fin-



ished No. 5 nationally in red-zone defense, an improvement of 67 spots from the year before, was No. 18 in fewest defensive first downs allowed and in fourth-down percentage, No. 29 in third-down defense (.347), No. 37 in total defense (350.1) and No. 39 in tackles for loss (6.5), an improvement of nine spots.

Andrew Jackson, defensive line coach

Andrew Jackson is in his fourth year as the defensive line coach.

In 2023, Jackson's defensive line was able to use as many as three-deep across the front, showcasing development at the position. West Virginia's defense ranked No. 1 in the Big 12 and tied for No. 19 in Power Five in sacks (33). The defense produced 84



tackles for loss (6.5 per game), ranking No. 2 in the Big 12 and tied for No. 14 among Power 5 schools. The defensive line was responsible for 16 sacks and 37 tackles for loss.

Jackson came to Morgantown after serving as the defensive line coach and recruiting coordinator for defense at Old Dominion in 2020.

Jeff Koonz, special teams coordinator/inside linebackers coach

Jeff Koonz is in his fifth year on the Mountaineers coaching staff as the special teams coordinator and the inside linebackers coach.

In 2023, the punt return defense once again had a stellar year, ranking No. 5 nationally, giving up an average of 0.23 yards per return. WVU ranked No. 27 in net punting, averaging 40.8



yards and No. 39 in punt returns, averaging 10.23 yards per return and returned one for a touchdown against UNC in the Duke's Mayo Bowl.

The Mountaineers were responsible for three blocked field goal attempts last season, ranking No. 10 nationally, which included two to seal the win at TCU.

Victor Cabral, outside linebackers coach

Victor Cabral is in his first year on the Mountaineers coaching staff as the outside linebackers coach.

Cabral comes to WVU after serving as the defensive line coach at Appalachian State for the 2023 season, helping lead the Mountaineers to a 9-5 record and the Sun Belt Conference's East Division Championship.



A standout defensive lineman and team captain at Georgia Southern from 2000-04, Cabral spent 11 years on the Eagles' coaching staff over three different stints and also

has coached at Samford and Georgia Military College.

Coach bios courtesy of WVU Athletics

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Big 12 bigger even after losing two national champs

Newcomer Utah is league's highest ranked team

Associated Press

The Big 12 has gotten bigger even after the departures of two national champions, with a westward expansion and a "Prime" addition among the league's four newcomers.

Mike Gundy is going into his 20th season as 17th-ranked Oklahoma State coach and has been part of all the Big 12's configurations. There was the original 12-team setup, then 10 teams with round-robin schedules before 14 last year and now 16 with additions from the dismembered Pac-12 at the same time Red River rivals Oklahoma and Texas left for the SEC.

"As we move forward, there's going to be a lot of parity. I should say more parity in college football than there has been over the last few years," said Gundy, whose Cowboys were Big 12 runners-up last season. "I think that we've got a number of teams in this league that have an opportunity to make a move nationally. Whether anybody can take over and dominate for an extended period of time would be hard to tell at this point."

Fourth-ranked Texas, the 2005 national champ, is gone after bookend Big 12 titles — in the inaugural 1996 season and its fourth last year to make the College Football Playoff. Only No.

SEE BIG 12, I-38



AP Photo

Utah and head coach Kyle Whittingham were picked first in the 2024 Big 12 preseason football media poll. Utah is one of four newcomers to the conference this season along with Colorado, Arizona and Arizona State.

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BIG 12

FROM PAGE I-36

16 Oklahoma has more, winning the league in 14 of the 28 seasons.

Newcomer Utah, with coach Kyle Whittingham also in his 20th season, is the league's highest-ranked team in The Associated Press Top 25 preseason poll. The No. 12 Utes return quarterback Cam Rising, a seventh-year senior who missed last season recovering from a knee injury.

This is the fourth league for Whittingham with the Utes. He was part of their WAC days as an assistant, and has been in the Mountain West, Pac-12 and now Big 12 as head coach.

"It's a transition we made before, although when we went to the Pac-12, we were a G5 school trying to come up a level, which there was a little bit of a curve there that we had to endure," he said. "We feel like we've got a good roster right now, one through 85, and ready to compete in this league."

Original Big 12 member Colorado returns after 13 seasons in the Pac-12 that included only two winning records. The Buffaloes are going into their second season with Deion Sanders as their coach. They lost eight of their last nine games after a 3-0 start for Coach Prime, who has reloaded through the portal again this season.

Rounding out the league

No. 18 Kansas State, No. 22 Kansas, Baylor, Iowa State, Oklahoma State and Texas Tech have been part of the Big 12 throughout its entire history. TCU and West Virginia joined in 2012, after a two-year span when the league



AP Photo

Colorado head coach Deion Sanders and the Buffaloes are one of four newcomers to the Big 12 this season. Colorado was previously in the conference from 1996-2011.

lost Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska and Texas A&M.

No. 21 Arizona and Arizona State arrived from the Pac-12 with Colorado and Utah.

BYU, Cincinnati, Houston and UCF all had losing records in their Big 12 debuts last season. They were a combined 8-28 in conference play, with only four of those wins against teams outside that quartet.

Ollie and other runners

All-America running back Ollie Gordon II, who led the nation with 1,732 yards rushing and 21 touchdowns last season for Oklahoma State, is one of six 1,000-yard rushers back in

the Big 12.

Texas Tech's Tahj Brooks ranked fourth nationally with 1,538 yards and UCF's RJ Harvey was sixth with 1,416 yards. The other returning 1,000-yard rushers are Kansas' Devin Neal (1,280 yards, 16 TDs), Kansas State's DJ Giddens (1,226 yards) and Cincinnati's Corey Kiner (1,047 yards).

New Big 12 QBs

Shedeur Sanders went from Jackson State to Colorado with his dad, and threw for 3,230 yards with 27 touchdowns and three interceptions. Noah Fifita, a third-year sophomore at Arizona, set a school record completing 72.4% of his passes for 2,869 yards

and 25 TDs.

Rising is back in the Big 12, where he redshirted as a freshman at Texas in 2018 before going to Utah.

UCF's KJ Jefferson and Baylor's Dequan Finn are dual-threat QBs who transferred into the Big 12 after five seasons elsewhere. Jefferson threw for 7,911 yards and 67 TDs and ran for 1,876 yards and 21 TDs in 44 games for Arkansas. Finn accounted for 8,914 yards (7,074 passing/1,840 rushing) and 88 scores (63 passing/25 rushing) at Toledo.

Notable games

Arizona plays its first Big 12 game at Kansas State on Friday, Sept. 13. Utah's conference opener — after an earlier game against Baylor that won't count in the standings — is Sept. 21 at Oklahoma State.

The Sunflower State showdown Oct. 26 could match top quarterbacks Jalon Daniels for Kansas and Avery Johnson for K-State. BYU is at Utah on Nov. 9, the first time their Holy War is a conference game since the Mountain West days of 2010, before BYU went independent for 12 seasons.

Big 12 Preseason Poll

1. Utah (20)
2. Kansas State (19)
3. Oklahoma State (14)
4. Kansas (5)
5. Arizona (3)
6. Iowa State
7. West Virginia
8. UCF
9. Texas Tech
10. TCU
11. Colorado
12. Baylor
13. BYU
14. Cincinnati
15. Houston
16. Arizona State

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